

CRS Insights

The Attack Against the U.S. Ambassador to South Korea

Mark E. Manyin, Specialist in Asian Affairs (mmanyin@crs.loc.gov, 7-7653)

Alex Tiersky, Analyst in Foreign Affairs (atiersky@crs.loc.gov, 7-7367)

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At a March 5 breakfast meeting in Seoul, a South Korean man attacked U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert with a knife, sending the Ambassador to the hospital with deep cuts on his face, fingers, and wrist. Lippert required surgery, including 80 stitches on his face. He was discharged on March 10 and is expected to make a complete recovery. Many Korean dignitaries, including President Park Geun-hye and the heads of South Korea's ruling party and main opposition party, visited Lippert in the hospital.

South Korean authorities arrested the attacker, Kim Ki-jong, on attempted murder and other charges. At the scene and later through his lawyer, Kim said he acted alone to protest large-scale annual U.S.-South Korean military exercises, which he said hinder inter-Korean dialogue and efforts for reunification. Kim is the director of a left-wing nationalist civic group. He has a history of involvement in anti-U.S. protests, has expressed support for pro-North Korean causes, and was convicted in 2010 for throwing cement blocks at the Japanese ambassador to South Korea.

Within days following the incident, [charges mounted that the Park government and its conservative base were exploiting the attack](#) to undermine domestic opposition groups and rally support for the U.S.-South Korea alliance. If the perception grows that the government and ruling party politicized the attack in this way, President Park and her ruling party may find it more difficult to obtain left-of-center support on issues that matter to Washington and are controversial in South Korea. (For more, see CRS Report R41481, [U.S.-South Korea Relations](#).) President Park's ruling Saenuri Party holds a slim majority in South Korea's National Assembly. The next legislative elections are scheduled for April 2016.

South Korean Attitudes Toward the United States

The attack on Ambassador Lippert contrasts with increasingly positive attitudes among South Koreans about the United States and the U.S.-South Korea alliance. For instance, in [a 2014 survey](#) by the Pew Research Center, over 80% of South Koreans registered a "favorable" opinion of the United States, up from less than 50% in 2003, when South Korea was swept by a wave of protests against the accidental killing of two Korean schoolgirls by a U.S. military vehicle in Seoul.

That said, many South Koreans do not hesitate to criticize individual U.S. government policies and express resentment when they feel that South Korean leaders are catering too much to U.S. interests. Once the immediate revulsion against the attack on Ambassador Lippert had passed, some South Koreans said that some government officials and conservative groups had been [overly obsequious](#) in apologizing for the incident. Additionally, some observers noted that the attack occurred just days after [a speech by a senior State Department official](#) that angered many Koreans who said it appeared to blame South Korea for being too critical of Japan.

A small segment of the South Korean population remains ideologically anti-American, partially a legacy of U.S. support for the authoritarian governments that ruled South Korea from 1948-1988. Kim, Ambassador Lippert's assailant, appears to come from this radical segment of South Korean society, which has shrunk in size and influence, particularly since the 1970s and 1980s, when [protests and even violent attacks against U.S. targets were not uncommon](#).

Links to North Korea?

Some South Koreans have criticized the Park government and her party for [politicizing the incident](#), including by appearing to link it to North Korea and pro-Pyongyang elements inside South Korea rather

than treating it as an isolated attack by an individual. Additionally, leaders of President Park's party reportedly [said that the main opposition party was partially responsible for the attack](#), because it had acted as a "host" for people like Kim, described in some Korean media as "pro-North leftists."

In their investigation of Kim, South Korean authorities found pro-North Korean literature in his home, as well as a history espousing pro-North Korean causes. Investigators reportedly are exploring the possibility of charging Kim with violation of South Korea's controversial National Security Law, which gives authorities the power to arrest individuals for acts deemed to endanger "the security of the state." Some observers, including the State Department, have criticized President Park in recent years for applying the law in a way that ["limits freedom of expression and restricts access to the internet,"](#) in particular by arresting critics of government policies. Hours after the Lippert attack, North Korea denied any involvement in the attack, but praised it as ["a just baptism by knife."](#) North Korea has sympathizers in South Korea. In 2014, South Korean courts, responding to a government suit, disbanded a far-left political party because of secret activities by party members that indicated they might act as sleeper agents in the event of a military conflict between the Koreans.

Diplomatic Security Considerations

At the time of the attack, Ambassador Lippert was under the immediate protection of one full-time bodyguard assigned from the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency, a practice [dating to the 1990s](#). The bodyguard, who reportedly joined in subduing the attacker, was unarmed, apparently in deference to South Korean gun laws.

Some analysts have questioned the adequacy of the security arrangements in place to protect the Ambassador. While security plans for U.S. missions abroad are managed by the State Department's [Bureau of Diplomatic Security](#) (DS), Ambassadors in practice have some latitude to determine their own protective postures (informed by the advice of their Regional Security Officer, the lead DS agent at post). The reliance by U.S. officials and facilities abroad on host-nation security services (under the reciprocal commitments spelled out in Article 29 of the [1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations](#)) is not unusual, particularly when those services are considered highly willing and capable, and threats are deemed to be relatively low. Host nation security provides one layer of the overall security posture at almost every U.S. diplomatic post. (See CRS Report R42834, [Securing U.S. Diplomatic Facilities and Personnel Abroad: Background and Policy Issues](#).) In the wake of the attack, the South Korean National Police have increased the size of the Ambassador's security detail, [according to the State Department](#).